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Interview with Harry Shank

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CHAPTER II: INTERVIEW WITH HARRY SHANK

For many years, rural communities provided education for their youth by establishing one-room schools. Even as the end of the era of these schools approached, teachers in the remaining one-room schools continued to teach basic knowledge and values. Each teacher arrived at the front of the schoolroom in a unique and fascinating way. Harry Shank's way was abrupt and unplanned.

In February, 1948, Mr. Shank and his wife had just returned to southeast Ness County. He possessed a Bachelor of Science Degree in Agriculture from Kansas State University and a desire to become a part of the family farm.

Before the young couple had even unpacked, Mr. Shank's older brother Clyde approached him about teaching at their old one-room school alma mater: Wellmanville. Clyde Shank was a member of the school board, and his fellow board members had asked him to persuade his younger brother to finish the school term.

An unusual situation provided the teaching opportunity. The lady who had been teaching at Wellmanville quit. She just did not arrive for school one morning. A long-distance commute might have proved

too much for her. Through his brother, Mr. Shank surmised that the older boys in the school contributed to the former teacher's early departure.

Mr. Shank's and his wife's parents lived in Bazine, Kansas, and they planned to take turns staying with each family until they could find a place of their own. Money was tight. A regular income, even for a few months, made the teaching offer appealing. Mr. Shank agreed to finish the term.

Mr. and Mrs. Clyde Shank lived just three miles southeast of Wellmanville. To be closer to the school, Mr. and Mrs. Harry Shank boarded with them for the remainder of the school year.

So, Mr. Shank consented, but he did not have a teaching certificate. He had not taken any education courses during his college career. At the time, that was the least of the board's worries. Mr. Shank contacted County School Superintendent Dorcas Cole. She decided that since he had a college degree, he could obtain a provisional certificate. He enrolled in a correspondence course through Fort Hays State Teachers' College in Hays, Kansas. This met the requirements of the provisional certification.

That accomplished, Mr. Shank started his teaching

career. Classes had not been in session at Wellmanville for over a week when he entered the school for the first time as a teacher. Considering the circumstances, the scene should have been set for a dramatic showdown. That was not the case. "The students never gave me any trouble," said Mr. Shank. "Perhaps being a man and a father-figure made the difference." A father-figure who stood six feet, four inches tall and was less than two years removed from service in World War II garnered respect.

The respect emanated from fourteen students: one eighth grader, two sixth graders, two fifth graders, two third graders, four second graders and three first graders. Mr. Shank wondered what he would do with them. Though the enrollment was not nearly as large as it had been in earlier years when he had attended school there himself, sitting at the teacher's desk was more intimidating than sitting in one of the desks facing it had ever been. He relied on those experiences as a student in a one-room school and the county superintendent. Mrs. Cole spent quite a bit of time at Wellmanville with Mr. Shank and his students during the first two weeks of his teaching career.

County and state requirements set the main courses

of study. Parents bought their children the textbooks they needed. Some of the textbooks were familiar to Mr. Shank because they were the same ones he had used as a student. "I especially remembered the old red speller," he recalled.

The subjects for the lower grades included reading, arithmetic, spelling, English and penmanship. The upper grades also studied geography, Kansas history, American history and social studies. The county superintendent supplied extra materials for seasonal activities and for art. The students enjoyed the time spent on art projects on Friday afternoons.

Aside from the Friday afternoon art activities, Mr. Shank followed a daily schedule that allowed time for each subject each day. Following the Pledge of Allegiance, Mr. Shank and his students discussed current events. This evolved into a favorite time for all. In fact, Mr. Shank discovered that the problem was not covering all subjects, but keeping everyone busy during the course of the day. In later years, the teacher's older brother Lloyd, a school superintendent, explained the situation: "Well, if all the students did was cover academic subjects, they probably could finish their grade level in six months." This was a

reference to the lack of extracurricular activities that had concerned some educators who believed one-room schools should be relegated to history.

Mr. Shank was not too concerned with students finishing work and having time to spare. The students selected books from the "library" housed on shelves at the back of the room, older students helped younger students, and others who finished lessons early helped with grading and other chores. Mr. Shank and his students practiced cooperative learning over forty-five years ago.

The students' school day began at nine o'clock in the morning. A fifteen minute recess during the morning and another in the afternoon provided breaks in the routine of desk work and recitation. Everyone brought a lunch and enjoyed mealtime and more playtime during the noon hour. The day ended at four o'clock.

As with all teachers, Mr. Shank's responsibilities did not begin and end with the bell. His two-hundred-dollar-a-month contract entailed more than preparation, classtime and grading. On the back of that first contract, the members of the board spelled out these additional clauses: "The teacher will provide janitorial services, build the fire, provide drinking

water and maintain order." Order concerned the board members because of the previous teacher. Mr. Shank dreaded one of the other clauses.

Wellmanville, located in the southeast corner of Ness County, was formed in 1881. The first school building was a "soddie." The sod building was replaced by a small frame building. The small frame building was moved off of the grounds and replaced by a larger frame building in 1924. A cistern was dug on the north side of the school building and families took turns filling the cistern for use by the teacher and students. By the time Mr. Shank taught at the school, the pump on the cistern had broken, so the board added the "provide water" clause. Mr. Shank filled an old five gallon cream can with water and hauled it to school every day. No water was wasted!

Janitorial services simply meant Mr. Shank cleaned the school. At least the toilet facilities required little care: two outhouses stood at the back of the school property. Another small building housed the coal supply. Mr. Shank carefully banked the fire in the big Warm Morning Stove each night so it could easily be started the next morning.

He traveled to school most mornings in his new

1948 model truck. He had sold his car to his brother Lloyd so he could purchase that first farm vehicle. For the most part, parents brought their children to school. A few lived close enough to walk. Two brothers, a third grader and a fifth grader, had the most envied mode of transportation. Their grandfather had given them an old car. They drove it to school. Whoever drove to school in the morning rode "shotgun" going home. The only problem was that sometimes they could not remember who had driven that morning. Mr. Shank handled any such difficulties as diplomatically as possible.

The form of discipline most dreaded by students was the loss of recess. Mr. Shank recalled that that action, or even the threat of it, stopped most problems. Actually, discipline problems hardly existed. Parents granted authority to the teacher to enforce the rules of good behavior. Problems at school usually remained at school because the discipline would be repeated at home. Mr. Shank expected good behavior and cooperation, and the students responded.

One rare incident that proved the rule occurred during a spelling test. Mr. Shank suspected one young man was cheating. The teacher hauled the student out

of his seat, deposited the half-hidden cheat-sheet and test in the trash and firmly replaced the wide-eyed culprit in his desk. Everyone in the room was convinced that cheating would not be tolerated.

With an eight month school year, the end of the school term approached quickly. The most memorable event of that short first teaching experience involved the one eighth grade student.

At that time, passing grades and a teacher's signature on a report card did not equal an eighth grade graduation certificate. A comprehensive county exam administered to all eighth grade students determined whether they had successfully completed their elementary level studies. The one eighth grade student at Wellmanville worried about the test.

Her teacher worried, too. The young lady, though capable in so many ways and helpful with the younger students, struggled with her own studies. Mr. Shank spent much of his time in the last weeks of the school term tutoring the student. He obtained copies of old county examinations and put her through trial runs. When she passed the examination, student and teacher were both very proud and happy.

The memories turned bittersweet. The student's

parents worked hard on their farm and supported the one-room school. They believed, though, that an eighth grade education was sufficient. Their daughter did not enter high school that fall. Mr. Shank knew she very much wanted to attend. He also knew it was not an unusual situation. Formal education for young farm people often ended after the eighth grade.

Years later, when his relative was hospitalized in a nearby city, Mr. Shank became reacquainted with this particular former student. She was a nurses' aide at the hospital. According to Mr. Shank's relative, she was the best nurse in the hospital. A visit with her revealed that she still regretted the missed opportunity of high school. She would have liked to try to become a registered nurse. That was not possible without a high school diploma.

The school year at Wellmanville had ended. Mr. Shank was offered the teaching position for the next year with a twenty-five-dollar-a-month increase in salary. He signed the contract. Since he was meeting the requirements, his provisional certificate was extended.

That summer he and his wife settled into a rented farm home just one-half mile north of his brother's

place. Their first child was born that summer.

The school term began in September of 1948 with few adjustments from the previous year. The students had all been promoted. The total number decreased since the one student had graduated and none began school that year. The schedule remained much the same as before.

A completely non-educational factor caused the memorable difference that school year: weather. The winter was long and difficult. Mornings began with students grouped around the pot-bellied stove. When the temperature in the building raised enough, students moved to the outer row of desks by the windows so they could see better. Dreary, cloudy days and no electricity made everyone squint.

Several quick-moving snowstorms created some tense times. One day a storm hit shortly after the noon break. Though not separated by many miles from any of the students' homes, the school was isolated in terms of any means of communication. Without a phone, Mr. Shank could not call parents and officially dismiss school. Before long, parents began to arrive to take their children home. Mr. Shank had decided that he would take the two car-driving brothers home on his way, but the parents of two sisters that lived in the

opposite direction had still not shown up to take the girls home.

Mr. Shank could have taken them all home, but he hesitated to start off in any one direction for fear of one set of parents arriving from the other. He did not want to leave any students alone at the school building. Finally, the girls' parents arrived. They had been away from home when the storm hit.

Mr. Shank headed south with the two brothers. It was a difficult trip. When he made his way to the turn-off to the boys' home, he was not sure he could manuever the long drive. He left his truck on the main road and walked the boys to their door to be sure they made the long walk okay, and that someone was home. He walked back to his truck and slowly drove through the worsening snowstorm to his own home.

That memory stayed with the older brother. He returned to the same rural community after his college graduation. He reminisced with Mr. Shank about that snowstorm in particular and the difficult winter in general. He remarked often about how his teacher trudged through the snow with the two young brothers to see them safely home.

The weather had to be extremely bad before the

students spent their breaks indoors. When snow covered the ground and did not allow them to play games like "Blackman" and "Gray Goose," they built snow forts and snowmen. The old coal stove became clothes dryer as well as heater. Mr. Shank allowed them to play outside because he knew they were used to being out in the cold and would be working in the snow doing chores when they went home from school.

As winter gave way to spring, horses became school ground regulars. The ground, frozen in the morning, turned to thick mud by afternoon and made the roads nearly impassable. Several students rode on horseback to school.

A farmer in the community, a grandfather to two of the students, loaned Mr. Shank a horse to ride to school. That meant leaving even earlier to be at the school and prepared for the arrival of the students. He strapped on his can of water and his book bag and away he went.

Although the weather caused difficulties, the school year proved to be even more enjoyable than the one before. Mr. Shank felt more confident of his teaching skills. Each subject was studied each day; recitations were completed. Some days the students

spent time at the blackboard participating in math contests or against the wall competing in impromptu spelling bees.

Monthly report cards showed progress. If Mr. Shank needed to have a conference with parents, he accomplished that when parents arrived to pick up their children after school. A general conversation could last until everyone else was gone. Then he spoke privately to parents about school matters.

One time a situation could not wait until the end of the school day. During noon recess a young girl disregarded the often-repeated admonition to "go wide around the swing set." She was struck on the forehead by the old wooden swing. Blood flowed. Mr. Shank cleaned her up, but he knew she should have stitches. He left the oldest student in charge and drove the girl home. Her parents hurried her to the doctor where she did indeed have several stitches taken to close the wound.

Several days during the school year, the county superintendent arrived and stayed the day. These observation days might have bothered some teachers but not Mr. Shank. He respected Mrs. Cole and credited her help during the first weeks he taught school with

the feelings of success he now enjoyed. When she came to spend a day at Wellmanville, he felt his trusted mentor had returned.

At the conclusion of this school term, Mr. Shank was offered his choice of the two schools in the restructured District #2: Wellmanville to the north and Glendale to the south. He decided to teach at Glendale.

He regretted leaving the students who had become important to him, but several factors made the teaching position at Glendale more desirable to him. The harsh winter convinced him that teaching at a school less than half as far away and to the south would be advantageous. He did take a cut in pay because of the fewer number of students enrolled at Glendale. He earned two hundred dollars a month. He thought that disadvantage was outweighed by the fact that a fewer number of students meant less time spent beyond the classroom with grading and preparation.

Compared to the enrollment at Wellmanville, Mr. Shank considered himself more of a tutor than a teacher as he began the fall term at Glendale in 1949. Four young girls, two sets of sisters, attended school there. Two of the students were first graders, one was a fifth grader and the oldest a sixth grader.

Updated school facilities meant janitorial duties consumed less time. A furnace was housed in the basement. A well on the school grounds provided water. The dreaded cream can could be left at home. It was never bronzed.

Mr. Shank appreciated the extra time that he had compared to the previous year. Though he still drove his family's only means of transportation to school, he was closer to home and not gone as long each day. He had more time to spend with his family and to do his farm work.

The school year proceeded pleasantly for teacher and students. Mr. Shank continued his daily schedule as before. He thought all of the girls made rapid progress. The opportunities for individual attention were especially helpful for the beginning students.

Even with such a small enrollment, the girls and their teacher prepared a Christmas program for the members of the community. This school boasted a piano. A lady in the community visited the school once in a while to play for group singing. She accompanied the girls for the Christmas program, too.

One of the girls was quite an artist and Mr. Shank encouraged her attempts as much as possible. Here

again, the small enrollment allowed time for the development of such skills.

The winter proved to be a mild one that passed quickly. As the term ended, Mr. Shank was faced with a life-altering decision. The members of the board offered him a contract for the next year.

A man of conscience, Mr. Shank questioned the validity of operating a school and paying full salary to a teacher for four students. He valued the traditions and experiences provided by one-room schools. He also realized the end of the era of such schools was approaching rapidly.

The regular salary from teaching provided a sense of security, but it was not a living wage. During that spring, Mr. Shank had worried about the farm work he needed to be doing.

As enjoyable as the year had been, as much as he enjoyed teaching and as easy as another year of teaching at Glendale would be, the crossroads was directly in front of Mr. Shank. He declined the position.

The parents surrounding the Glendale School dearly wanted the school to continue. The number of preschool children in the district meant the enrollment should increase. Had a replacement not been found,

Mr. Shank might have reconsidered. A replacement was secured. Mr. Shank thought he had reached the end of his brief teaching career. He had: as a full-time teacher.

By 1958, Mr. Shank had moved his family to a farm on the Pawnee Creek in the southern part of Ness County. As he had foreseen, fewer one-room schools existed. Fewer families lived on farms. Wellmanville had been closed, but the families around Glendale still wanted to preserve their school as long as possible. The enrollment at Glendale had actually grown to ten students.

The teacher at Glendale needed credit hours to maintain her certificate. The members of the school board called on Mr. Shank, the former teacher, to fill in while the contracted teacher returned to school. Mr. Shank agreed to substitute for the 1959 spring term. When he had quit teaching, he had not continued his work on a teaching certificate, but he was approved for substitute teaching by the county superintendent.

The distance of seven miles presented no hazards. Roads were improved. The school and all of the families had telephones, so school could be dismissed if conditions were considered too extreme. The school

had been modernized. It now featured electricity, running water and indoor restrooms. The books were new, but the routine relatively unchanged. The contracted teacher returned to finish the year; Mr. Shank returned to full-time farming.

His services were sought one more time. The very next school year, the members of the school board at Riverside School, three miles west of Mr. Shank's farm, asked him to substitute at that school. Again, the teacher needed college hours. This time, the year had just begun. The school was housed in a modernized brick building. Mr. Shank taught one eighth grader, one seventh grader, two fifth graders, one fourth grader, one third grader and three first graders. The third grader was the only girl attending school there that year. What Mr. Shank remembered most about this experience was how bashful one of the first graders was. The boy talked to other students and laughed and played on the playground, but he would not talk to the teacher. Mr. Shank could not get a word out of him for weeks. Gradually, he joined in during recitation time.

The predominantly male population at Riverside that year used every minute of recess time to sharpen football skills. As always, Mr. Shank was "the biggest

kid on the playground." Both teams clamored to have their teacher on their side. Their teacher enjoyed being outdoors during recess as much as they did.

Mr. Shank now felt like a seasoned veteran of full-time teaching and substituting. He continued with the Riverside students for several months and directed one more Christmas program. By the first of the year, the full-time teacher had returned.

Those months in 1959 proved to be the last in Mr. Shank's teaching career. Riverside closed that spring. Some of the students transferred to Joint One, the one-room school two miles southeast of Mr. Shank's farm his own children attended.

His involvement in education did not end that year. He was a member of the Joint One School Board for several years. Later, he was elected to the Bazine Rural High School Board and sat on that board through the harrowing times of school unification. He continued to serve on the newly formed Bazine Unified School Board.

Mr. Shank spoke fondly of one-room schools from the multiple perspectives of student, teacher and parent. He believed one-room school students flourished and were well-prepared for their futures.

His experiences made him glad he answered the needs of three different one-room schools. His teaching career extended the tradition of one-room schools, however briefly. Those few years provided one-room school memories for his students.